

10.10.21

## Forgiveness

**Grace and peace to you from our Lord Jesus Christ...**

In our Gospel reading this morning, Peter asks Jesus, "*Lord, if another member of the church sins against me, how often should I forgive?... as many as seven times?... and Jesus said to him, "Not seven times, but, I tell you, seventy seven times."*... in other words, in Jesus' day (7 was considered a number of perfection) and our Lord is telling him to forgive endlessly – the same way God has forgiven us....

And so, this morning in the time that I have with you I want to talk to you about the topic of forgiveness (and with full disclosure tell you up front that as much as the Bible encourages us to do it – even commands it – what I've come to discover on my journey (and in my reflections) is that no where in the Bible does it tell us *how to do it*)...

or even, *what it is* - or *how to know* when we've actually forgiven someone... (I mean, does forgiveness come when we stop plotting our revenge and wanting the other person to die?)...

and lastly, let me add that even if you have all the faith in the world (the path of forgiveness will more than likely be the most difficult road you ever travel – and what's more, without the power of God to see us through I am convinced that it would be impossible) especially for those who have been greatly damaged...

Again, these are my thoughts on the matter (and from my own reflections) and experiences (but perhaps together we can examine it and invite our Lord into the discussion) so that we can continue to learn what forgiveness means (and what it might look like) in our own practice of faith...

And so, and I want to begin with the story of a mother who heard screaming coming from her *seven-year old son's bedroom*... and being alarmed by the cry for help, the mother hurries into the room and finds her 2 year old daughter pulling his hair... the mother gently released the little girl's grip and said comfortingly to the boy, "*There, there... She didn't mean it... She doesn't know that hurts.*"... The boy nodded his acknowledgement, and the mother left the room...

As so, she starts down the hall (but this time) she hears *the little girl screaming...* Rushing back in to the room, she asked, "*What happened?*"

The little boy replied, "*She knows how it feels now.*"

I share that story with you because I think (in a spiritual sense) many of us are like that little boy... someone hurts us – we want to hurt them... we want to get back at them... we want revenge... we want them to know how it feels to suffer – the same we they made us suffer... I think that's a common reaction most people have to being hurt...

In fact, I counseled a woman a few years ago who told me that her husband had taken everything they had saved out of the bank (and gambled it all away)... and do you know what her first words were?... she said, "*I wanted to kill him*"... and perhaps she would have been justified in killing him – because he robbed her of their future by squandering away their life savings (which I think we'd all agree was a very selfish, horrible thing to do to someone- you're supposed to love)...

And maybe something like that has happened to you?... maybe someone stole something from you, or hurt you, or hurt someone that you love (and you were unable to do anything about it – at the time)... and I would guess that even today there are very unpleasant feelings that arise when you think of this person (and what they've done)...

So let me begin by telling you (what I have learned) that forgiveness is 'not'... first of all, let me say that forgiveness is not the same thing as 'reconciliation'... Now, I know that I've said this to you before, but you can forgive someone who has hurt you – but that doesn't mean that you're going to have a relationship with that person (ever again)...

A woman (or a man, for instance) who may have been abused by someone – can grow to forgive – but that doesn't mean that he or she will ever desire to be in the same room with that person... it doesn't mean they will all of a sudden become friends or have a good relationship again... because forgiveness is not the same thing as being reconciled with the people who have hurt us... in fact, sometimes it's best that we let them go...

Secondly, forgiveness doesn't mean we let people off the hook... I remember someone once telling me, "*I'm afraid that if I forgive him he'll do it to someone else*"... and my response is – "*Jesus never said that Christians have to be door mats in this life*"... (it's okay to stand up for yourself)... and if someone has done you wrong – forgiveness doesn't mean that you save them from prison, or from paying you back, or even from holding them accountable... because that's not forgiveness – that's just enabling the behavior...

Thirdly, forgiveness is not forgetting about it... perhaps like you, I was raised to 'forgive and forget'... I was taught to put it behind me... act like it never happened (which is probably the worst advice anyone could ever give)... and I say that, because try telling that to parents who lost a child to a drunk driver... or to the families of the 13 Marines who were killed in Kabul... try telling them to 'forgive and forget' and see how they turn out 10, 15, 20 years from now...

But what I do believe is that we should 'forgive and remember'... remember the pain, remember the tragedy, the hurt – remember it so that (we might never do the same to someone else) but also so that it doesn't happen again... yes, we can forgive (by the Grace of God – and only by the Grace of God) – but we should never forget what was done... and so, my advice has always been (forgive and remember)...

Let me also add that forgiveness is not waiting for an apology... I hate to be the bearer of bad news today, but some people are never going to apologize to you...

In fact, I have a friend who often says, "*some people are sicker than others*" – which means that the spiritual path that you're on right now, the feeling of connection you have with God, the love you have for Jesus, and the desire to become a better person – that's your thing – it's your path (and that doesn't mean the people around you are as spiritually mature as you are)... and it could even be that the person you're waiting to apologize (has died, or moved away, or has blocked you on all forms of social media)... but let me just say that forgiveness is not waiting for them to apologize to you – because it may never happen...

And lastly, forgiveness may not be a onetime event... you might have tried in the past to forgive (and perhaps you made some headway – but then found yourself

feeling angry again and again), or maybe you felt you were ready at some point and then changed your mind...

But think of it the way you do when you think about your faith (or even like the grieving process)... for most of us it comes and goes in waves (I've never met anyone with perfect faith everyday- under every circumstance – nor have I met anyone who told me the grieving process is easy) and why would it be any different in dealing with our wounds... maybe that's why I understand what some people mean when they say, "*forgiveness is a journey – and not always a one-time trip*"... and it will take time... perhaps the rest of your life...

So let me switch gears for a moment and tell you what I think 'forgiveness' is... forgiveness – it seems to me – is freedom... I mean, think of it this way – until you forgive the person who hurt you they continue still to take you hostage... in fact, someone once said that forgiveness is the desire to free a prisoner – only to discover that the prisoner is you...

But even more importantly – forgiveness is the ultimate expression of love... and I don't mean that we're going to fall in love with the people who hurt us – but it means that we refuse to let love be taken from us... we refuse to let the greatest gift that God gave us to be snatched away... and in all of its pain, in all of its expressions of beauty, in all of its courage and honor – I do believe that those who forgive shine as rays of light – for the rest of us - in a world so full of darkness...

Forgiveness – as I see it – means that we stand on the winning side... we stand on God's side...

And so my question for you is this – if you are the one who came here this morning (still holding onto the pain, still clutching onto the past, still living as a victim and not the victor) why don't you turn it over to God today and trust Him to renew you, trust Jesus to give you new life (not as a victim anymore- but as the victor), and let God lead you to a new joy that will keep you - on the winning side of love...

why can't that be you?... or should I ask, why won't it be you?...

Do you remember that passage from Psalm 121:1?... it says, "I lift up my eyes to the mountains— where does my help come from?... My help comes from

the LORD, the Maker of heaven and earth.”... and the mountains that the Psalmist is referring to are the things that seem impossible at the moment to climb – like trying to forgive the ones who hurt us... but the Psalmist is wise in doing what we can do as well – invite God into the challenges of life (through prayer, through obedience to His Word, and through faith in His promises) and only then (are all things possible with the love of God)...

And remember – this is not about becoming a nice person... our faith goes deeper than that... our faith teaches us how to be free (and become the person we were meant to be)...

So, let me close with the story of a little boy who had an expression of pain on his face... and when his father asked him why he looked like he was in so much pain the boy said, *“because I am sitting on a bumble bee and he has stung me”*...

So father says, *“Well, why don’t you get off of the bee and go fix yourself”*...

To which the little boy says, *“because I figure I’m hurting him more than he is hurting me”*...

And friends, I leave you with that final thought to remind you that God doesn’t want anyone of us to be hurting, and in pain – but He wants us to be in Jesus and in His glory – and today is your choice to move towards forgiveness... and if you find the courage to do so – let God walk with you (every step of the way)...

May God be the healer of your wounds, the final judge over matters too big for you to handle, and may His love always live in your heart...

in Jesus’ name we pray...

**Amen!**